

RUNAWAY JONAH, AND THE CONVENIENT SHIP NO. 2171

A SERMON
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*“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord,
and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish.”
Jonah 1:3.*

SAD sight! *Here is a servant of God running away from his work.* As well see the stars wandering from their spheres! When we read that he fled from the presence of God, we do not suppose that Jonah thought that he could get away from God as to His omnipresence, but he wanted to escape serving in the divine presence—he wished to avoid being employed by God in his special service as a prophet. He thought that the Lord might call him and send him upon errands if he went to Nineveh, for Assyria had some measure of evident relationship to the Lord and His people. But if he could once travel as far as Tarshish, he would be out of the world altogether and would no more have to speak in the name of the Lord. He imagined that there could be no relationship between Tarshish and Israel and he would not be expected to do any further prophetic work. Or, if he did, he would not suffer in repute, for the report would not reach Jerusalem. If he did not want to get away from the toilsome and self-denying duty of prophecy, he did, at least, wish to avoid an expedition to the heathen of Nineveh—an expedition which, he foresaw, would not be for his own honor.

Now, why did he desire to get away from his work? Whatever reason he had, it must have been a bad one, for no servant of God ought, on any account whatever, to think of quitting the service of his Lord. We should not wish to avoid the doing of the Lord's will. When we know what our duty is, we ought to follow it with unswerving determination. We must not wish to leave our post, no, not even to go to heaven. We ought not to be sighing to be gone. Employers do not like a man who is always looking for Saturday night! Let him attend to the work of Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and the week will end quite soon enough. One does not like to see a fellow standing about, stretching his arms upward and sighing, “The week is very long. I wish it were Saturday.” You like a man who means to do a fair day's work for a fair day's wage and who does not watch till you turn your back that he may slacken his labor. We must not be crying, “Oh that I had wings like a dove!” What should we do with them if we had them? Such heavy mortals as some of us are had better keep nearer the ground! Whatever reason anyone thinks he has for avoiding the Lord's work, the reason is as vicious as the thing he is aiming at, for children of God have no right to leave the service of their heavenly Father and, when they do so, it is at their own peril.

What was his reason? Was it, in part, that he considered the work to be too great for him? Certainly he had a great task appointed him. “Nineveh, an exceedingly great city of three days' journey”—how was one man to admonish and evangelize the whole of it? Preposterous! Might he not have been aided by at least one colleague? Even Moses had his Aaron! Why did not the Lord send forth a college of prophets, or an army of preachers and bid them go and divide the vast city into districts? Then they could hold services in all the large halls, at the street corners, or even visit from house to house! Just one man is pitted against hundreds of thousands? Would a single voice be heard amid the noise of a city which was full of tumult? The odds were great against the lone man. Was that why Jonah ran away? I think not—but it has been the cause of the flight of many others. Is there a servant of God here who feels unequal to his work and therefore wishes he could escape from it? My dear brother, you are unequal to your work, for you have no sufficiency of your own! I know, also, that I am, in and of myself, unequal to my own calling—shall we, therefore, run away? No, no! That is not the true line of argument. This is the reason why we should stick to our work all the more closely. Every hard thing can be cut by something harder and the most difficult work can be done by stern resolution. But if the work cannot be well done by us, how will it be done without us? If our diligence seems too little, what will our negligence be? If there is too much for us to do, should we therefore leave undone what we can do? God forbid! Pluck up courage, my brother, and in your own personal weakness find a strong reason for getting to your work, for, “When I am weak, then am I strong” and the strength of God is made perfect

in our weakness! With more prayer we shall have more power. I hardly think that fear of being overdone was Jonah's reason for deserting his post.

Why did Jonah wish to run away? Because he did not like the Ninevites? I think that there was something of that on his mind. He was a stern old Jew and he loved his race—and he felt no desire to see anything done for the Gentiles or for the heathen outside the Abrahamic covenant—therefore he had no passion for a mission to Nineveh. Is there anybody here who does not want to go to a certain service because he does not like the people? Will you flee to Tarshish to get away from a dreaded sphere? Are you backing out of your duty because those with whom you are to serve are not quite to your taste—too ignorant or too cultured, too countrified or too polite? Come, my dear brother, this must not be! Be not of a cross, morose disposition as Jonah undoubtedly was. If the men to whom you are sent are worse than others, let that be a call for you to go to them, first, even as the apostles were to “begin at Jerusalem.” If those to whom you are sent are greater sinners than others, they need Christ all the more! And if you have heard a very bad report of them, surely there is a call for you to elevate them. However, I am not sure that this was very much Jonah's case, though it may have been one of the many arguments that worked together to produce his undutiful behavior.

Was it not, possibly, because Jonah knew that God was merciful? “Now,” said he to himself, “if I have to go through Nineveh and say, ‘Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown,’ and if these people repent, it will not be overthrown! And then they will say, ‘Pretty prophet that Jonah! He is a man that cries, ‘Wolf,’ when there is no wolf,’ and I shall lose my reputation.” Do I address any servant of God here who is afraid of losing his reputation? This is not a reason which will stand examination. My brother that is a fear which does not trouble me; I have lost my reputation several times, and I would not go across the street to pick it up! It has often seemed to me to be a thing that I should like to lose—that I might no longer be pressed with this huge throng—but might preach to two or three hundred people in a country village, look after their souls and stand clear, at last, to God about each one of them. Whereas, here I am tied to a work I cannot accomplish—pastor to more than 5,000 people! A sheer impossibility! How can I watch over all your souls? I should have an easy conscience if I had a church of moderate size which I could efficiently look after. If a reputation gets one into the position I now occupy, it certainly is not a blessing to be coveted. But if you have to do anything for Christ which will lose you the respect of good people and yet you feel bound to do it, never give two thoughts to your reputation for, if you do, it is already gone in that secret place where you should most of all cherish it. The highest reputation in the world is to be *faithful*—faithful to God and your own conscience. As to the approbation of the unconverted multitude, or of worldly professors, do not care the turn of a button for it—it may be a deadly heritage. Many a man is more a slave to his admirers than he dreams of—the love of approbation is more a bondage than an inner dungeon would be. If you have done the right thing before God and are not afraid of His great judgment seat, fear nothing, but go forward! I think that there was a little of regard for reputation in Jonah—possibly a great deal.

But still there was a higher and a better motive, though even that was a bad one, for anything is bad, however true and excellent in itself, that leads a man to run contrary to God's mind. It was this. He thought that the character of God Himself would suffer, for if he went down to Nineveh and proclaimed, “Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,” then the people might repent and Jehovah would allow them to live. And then, after a while, the people would say, “Who is Jehovah? His Word does not stand fast. He does not carry out His judgments. He lays His hand on the hilt of His sword and then pushes it back into the scabbard.” Thus the Lord Himself, by His mercy, would lose His name for truth and Immutability. Jonah would have preferred the destruction of Nineveh to the least dishonor to the name of the Lord. Have you ever felt as if you could wish that God would execute judgment on deadly forms of error and cruel forms of oppression? Have you not been half weary of His longsuffering? I stood at the bottom of Pilate's staircase in Rome. Pretentious imposition! It is said to be the staircase from which our Lord came down from Pilate's Hall—and there are certain holes in the wood which covers the marble wherein are said to be seen the drops of blood which fell from our Lord's bleeding shoulders. As I saw people going up those stairs on their knees and the priests looking on, it occurred to me that if the Judge of all would lend me His thunderbolts for about five minutes, I would have made a wonderful clearance. It was the Jonah spirit stirring me and I felt I did well to be angry. But, you see, the good Lord did not empower me to be an executioner—and I am right glad that He did not! Have you ever felt a zeal for the Lord of Hosts which led you, like John, to wish to call fire from heaven? Did you not feel half sorry that the Lord withheld His anger when it seemed necessary to execute vengeance in order to maintain the honor of His gospel? Have you not almost said, “Oh, that He would punish such tremendous iniquities”? Not long ago, when these streets of ours were ringing with stories of licentious infamy, did you not feel as if something must be done, something terrible, to sweep away the dens of lust and cleanse the Augean stables of pollution? But God did nothing in the way of plague, or war, or famine. In His longsuffering He passed by the transgressors and allowed them, still, to go on in their

wickedness as He has done these many years, bearing and forbearing, if haply men may come to repentance. This is a trial to righteous souls!

That, I think, was the great fear that lay in the heart of Jonah, for he said to God, when God had spared the city, "I pray You, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that You are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repent You of the evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech You, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." This was not because the people were spared, but because he thought God had lost His honor by not fulfilling His threats.

I have given too much time to these excuses of Jonah. If you have any excuses for not doing what you ought to do, turn them out of doors and never let them in again. Away with them! Away with them! You need not even take the trouble to repeat them to yourselves, or to judge their comparative value—they are all mischievous. If you are a servant of God, obey Him at once without question. If you are not a servant of God, God grant that you may be, for, if you are not His servant, you are His foe. And if you turn not to Him through Jesus Christ and do not find mercy at His hands, what will become of you?

Now I come to the text. Jonah desired to go away from his prophetic work by journeying to the out-of-the-way place called Tarshish. And when he came to Joppa, which was the port of Jerusalem, he found a vessel bound for the place which he desired to reach. May we be taught of the Holy Spirit certain practical truths of God from this incident!

I would teach you four things.

I. The first is—WE MAY NOT FOLLOW OUR IMPULSES TO DO WRONG. Jonah felt it come upon him, all of a sudden, not to go to Nineveh, but to Tarshish. "Tarshish! Tarshish!" was constantly whispered in his ear, till he had Tarshish on the brain and go he must.

Now I very commonly meet with persons who say, "I felt that I must do so-and-so. It came upon me that I must do so-and-so." I am afraid of these impulses—very greatly afraid of them! People may do right under their power, but they will spoil what they do by doing it out of mere impulse and not because the action was right in itself. People far oftener do very wrong under impulse and I feel it necessary to give a warning to any here who are prone to be so led. Our impulses are not to be depended on—our thoughts run wild. Do you say, "It came into my mind all of a sudden to do so-and-so"? And do you think this a good reason for your act? You are much mistaken! Do you say, "It flashed upon me to do so"? Do not let this be the rule of life. As well follow a will-o'-the-wisp as follow these freaks of fancy. You must never obey an impulse to do wrong! Now, in Jonah's case the impulse was, "Go to Tarshish. Go to Tarshish." I dare say that he could have pleaded that he felt pressed in spirit to do so. "Go to Tarshish, go to Tarshish," was still beaten upon the drum of his soul.

Now it may be that the impulse is to do a very brave thing. To go to Tarshish was a daring act. Jews never took well to seafaring. They were a land-loving people. Will Jonah go in a *ship*? We nowadays think little of it—but the Hebrews thought it a very terrible ordeal to go upon the sea. And then, to go to Tarshish—to the utmost ends of the earth—who but the men of Tyre would venture so far? These Hebrews did not know what kind of a place Tarshish was, but Jonah is bold to go. Some of you who are now in the Tabernacle ought to be on the Congo, or in North Africa, or in India, or in China—but you do not go from lack of courage. Yet, you see, men are bold enough when bent on going wrong. They will take great leaps in the dark! Whereas others are afraid to follow the *right* along a far safer way, Jonah will go to Tarshish! He is not afraid of the sea, or the storm, or anything—but although the impulse may seem to call him to that which is brave and noble, it is evil—for it leads him to oppose the plain command of God.

Impulses may also appear to be very self-denying. It was disagreeable to go to sea and to leave his native land and all its associations. Yet on this point of self-denial it is easy to go wrong. A man may be worshipping self by practicing what he calls self-denial. The devil can readily use this as a raiment of light under which to hide the demon of arrogant self-righteousness. Men may fast from bread that they may gorge their souls on pride.

It seemed also that *he might have claimed liberty in this matter.* Surely he might go to Tarshish if he liked! It is true he was a prophet, but could he not quit the service if he wished? Does God turn men into slaves that they may serve Him? Surely a prophet may make an excursion and take a holiday! If he did not feel happy in going to Nineveh, was it right for him to go? Have you ever met with this form of argument? I have heard people speak about sacred duties in this style. Take, for instance, believers' Baptism—they believe that it is Scriptural, but they say—"I never felt called upon to attend to it." As if we were not called upon to obey every command of Christ! I have heard persons say, "No doubt it is in the Word of God, but I have never felt it laid home to me." What a wicked thing to say! If I had a boy, and I gave him a command, and he told me that he did not feel it "laid home," and therefore should not obey me, I think I should take care to lay it home very soon in a way which he might not appreciate. I believe that when Christian people trifle with known duties, their heavenly Father will soon find a rod to

fit their backs. A tender conscience looks to the Word of the Lord and longs in all things to be conformed to it. What do you need beyond the command of God? If an angel were sent from heaven to command you to obey, the command would not be more binding upon you than it is now! The Lord has given you liberty—not liberty to sin—but liberty to *obey*. Never talk of freedom to do wrong. It is a horrible thing for one to say, “God loves us to be free in our service of Him and therefore I shall not serve Him, but follow my own impulses.”

At the same time, Jonah was violating his conscience, *running counter to the inner life*. As a servant of God he was bound to go where he was commanded and he was fighting against that which was to him a necessary element of life. O friends, take care of defiling your consciences! Whatever you do, never trifle with conscience. If you are going to make a gash in yourself anywhere, make it on your ear, or on your nose, but not in your conscience! The wounding of your members would pain you and might injure your beauty—but a wound in your conscience is a far more serious matter since it touches the center of life. A gash in the conscience may disfigure a soul forever. Let conscience speak to you in all things and do not follow fancy. Weigh the impulse in the scales of conscience and if it is not such that conscience can guarantee it to be consistent with the mind of God, let the impulse alone. We are no more to follow vain impulses than cunningly-devised fables. The Word of the Lord is to be our leading star in all things.

Persons who talk about their impulse *will often do what they would condemn in others*. This ought to open their eyes to their dangerous proceeding. If anybody else had run away to Tarshish when he was told to go to Nineveh, Jonah would have seen his wrong and would have rebuked him with all his might. I should like to have seen Jonah analyzing Jonah’s case—just as David judged and condemned the rich man who took the poor man’s ewe lamb—and then found that he had been judging and condemning *himself*! I should like to make some of you into jurymen upon your own cases. I am sure that you would censure yourselves in burning language for those very things which you now allow. How clearly would you see the disgrace of a man’s running away from the plain path of righteousness because he had a miserable impulse urging him to do wrong! Why, you can see the absurdity of it now. Will you, then, go on with a like course yourself? Will you flee to Tarshish when God bids you go to Nineveh? Shall self rule? Shall the flesh be pleased?

This pretense of impulse is what *none of us would allow to be an excuse if it were made the rule of conduct towards ourselves*. If any person had an impulse to knock us down, we should not see the propriety of it. If he had an impulse to rob us, we should feel an impulse to call in a constable! If any man had an impulse to wrong us, we should appeal to the law for protection. In the same way, if we feel an inward incitement to do what we ought not to do, let us not be so silly and so wicked as to imagine that the law will be relaxed because of the evil movements of our mind! I think it necessary to take this text and speak in this way because I have seen several examples of men following, not the Word of God, not the law of righteousness, but some idle movements of their own minds to which they attached an authority which did not belong to them. I am ready to say, “How long shall your vain thoughts lodge within you?” But they half imagine that these fancies come from God, whereas God is not the Author of evil desires and suggestions! It is much more likely that these thoughts come from the devil—and most of all likely that they rise from a foolish and corrupt heart. If anything says to you, “Flee to Tarshish,” when God says, “Go to Nineveh,” shut your ears against the evil impulse and hasten to do as God bids you. What have you to do with the devices and desires of your own hearts? Are these to be a law to you? I pray you, be not among the foolish ones who will be carried about with every wind of fancy and perversity. “To the law and to the Testimony,” should be your cry and you may not appeal to inward movements and impulses.

II. My second remark is this—WE MAY NOT TAKE A WRONG COURSE BECAUSE IT SEEMS EASY. Jonah says, “I will go to Tarshish.” And he goes down to the port of Joppa where he finds a ship going to Tarshish. How easy a thing it often is to carry out an evil purpose! My dear hearers, whether you are Christians or not Christians, I want to put you on your guard against the idea that because a certain course in life is very natural and easy, you may therefore follow it, though it is not right.

Remember that *the way of destruction is always easy*. “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, and many there are which go in there.”

The way to hell is downhill and this is easy traveling. Because it seems easy, natural and almost inevitable for you to go along a certain questionable road, do not, therefore, dream that this gives you a license to follow it. You have reason to suspect a course in life in which there is no difficulty, for righteousness is by no means an easy thing. If a course of conduct should be difficult, you may the more surely reckon upon its being right, for “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there are that find it.”

Remember that to do wrong will always be easy while our carnal nature is what it is. Men can always find somewhere or other, the means to rebel against God. The old proverb is, “You can always find a stick to beat a dog with”—and I only quote it to show that in some things the will always ensures

the way. Man can always find ways of sinning against God. I remember, in my younger days, a schoolboy who, when at play with his companions, would fly into furious passions and would at once throw something at the person with whom he was angered. And the point I noticed was that he always found something to throw. Let him be in the schoolroom, or in the playground, or in the street—there would surely be a stone, or a book, or a slate, or a cup ready to his hand. So is it with men who fight against the Lord—they discover weapons everywhere in the fury of their rebellion. The evil brain is quick in devising. The depraved heart is swift in apprehending and the sinful hand is deft in carrying out any and every scheme of disobedience to the Lord. When a man wishes to sin, it is always easy to sin and therefore the readiness of any mode of action is no argument in its favor.

Satan also labors to make men sin, and his cunning is great. When he tempted Jonah to go to Tarshish, the evil one knew that there was a ship at Joppa waiting for a fair wind to sail for Tarshish. Therefore he whispered into Jonah's ear, "Go to Tarshish," because he knew that he would not be thwarted in following out the base suggestion. Our tempter has a complete acquaintance with what is going on in the world and therefore he can plot and scheme so that his suggestion shall be supported by events which are transpiring. He is *not* omniscient, but his army of spies keeps him well posted. He can therefore fit his temptations to our surroundings.

The way of sin may well be easy since *evil men will help you that way*. If anything wrong is to be done, the sons of Belial will lend a willing hand! Thus an evil device may well succeed since all the world pulls that way. Only set up a calf and the tribes will hasten to cry, "These are your gods, O Israel." Sin is soon made popular. All men will praise the evil way which yields them pleasure. In the rush along the downward road the eager crowd will carry you off your feet and bear you with them down to destruction without your needing to exert yourself—and therefore it is generally easy to go wrong—it is swimming with the stream, flying with the wind.

Moreover, *good things are always difficult*. God makes them so for purposes of discipline to His people. He that can persevere in goodness, when made to suffer by it, is good, indeed. It is, moreover, an increase to the honor of saints that they are enabled to do the right thing under great opposition and to fight their way to heaven, foot by foot, at the sword's point. If virtue were so very easy, where would be the honor of it? To glory and Immortality we climb uphill!

Do not, I pray you, fall into the delusion that because an evil act looks to be the next thing, the inevitable thing, therefore you may do it! The law is not, "Do the easiest thing," or some would be very virtuous. *Would you excuse other people for injuring you on the ground that it was easy to do so?* Somebody in your house pilfers, robs you of your trinkets or your cash—but you do not accept the excuse that such things were so readily got at that it was natural for the thief to take them! A man only opens his mouth and takes away your character—is the ease of slander an excuse for it? A person signs your name to a check and gets the money for it—is it a valid excuse when he says, "I have a great facility in imitating handwriting. Forgery is very simple and remunerative, so you can hardly blame me for trying it"? No, friends, you denounce the thief, the slanderer, the forger—and even so will you be denounced if you fall into the sin which does so easily beset you. I doubt not I am pricking the conscience of some who will do anything for a quiet life and are gradually slipping down to hell because the way there is so smooth that they delight in it—so easy that their sloth prefers it. I know how many are excusing themselves for doing wrong because it is, in their case, so natural, while to do right would cost so great a trial. O sirs, take yourselves out of the deadly atmosphere which renders the sleep of sin almost sure to overtake you! Excuses are soon fabricated! I pray you, quit that unrighteous business and, at all costs, follow after that which is good! Begin by faith in Jesus and then go on to build up a holy character. May the Holy Spirit work it in you!

III. Now, we will go a step further. WE MAY NEVER PLEAD PROVIDENTIAL ARRANGEMENT AS AN EXCUSE FOR DOING WRONG. There could hardly ever be a more remarkable instance of apparently providential co-operation than we have here! Jonah wants to go to Tarshish and having selected that place as the region of his hiding, he must go down to Joppa, on the Mediterranean Sea. He walks on the wharf and the first thing he sees is a ship going to Tarshish! Is not that providence? Boats did not often make that voyage. Do we not confess that it is providence when we learn that the vessel will take passengers at a set fare? Jonah wants to go to Tarshish and the very day that he gets to Joppa, a decked vessel is about to start for the remote region which he desired to reach! No one can refuse to see an apparent providence. This is often used as a cover for wicked actions. "I could not do otherwise," says one. "Providence seemed to point in that way. I should have been flying in the face of God if I had not done as I have done." Ah, me! How base is man to seek to saddle his sin upon God! How grossly you deceive yourself! If Jonah was so persuaded, he was soon cured of his error. Two or three hours later, when they woke Jonah from his sleep in the hole of the ship and he saw that awful storm—did he then consider that a gracious providence had led him into that tremendous tempest? He soon wished himself anywhere else than on the great sea! When they were about to throw

him out to the fishes, he did not say much about providence—he was too much convinced of his own folly to blame his God. I have seen a man in trade doing certain tricky things and he has tried to make it out that the circumstances compelled him to do it. “Such-and-such a person walked in just at that time and said certain things—and another event occurred so remarkably pat to the case that it all looked like a providential arrangement—and everyone who saw it would have thought so.” Nonsense! Nothing can make it right to do wrong! I pray you, never blaspheme God by laying your sins on the back of His providence! This is an act of daring presumption and profanity. You will never see a providence more remarkable than that which occurred to Jonah and yet Jonah, for all that, was rebelling against the Lord in going down to Tarshish! Providence or no providence, the Word of the Lord is to be our guide and we must not depart from it under pretext of necessity or circumstances.

It is very easy to make up a providence when you want to do so. If you sit down and try to find, in the ways of God, an excuse for the wrong which you mean to commit, the crafty devil and your deceitful heart, together, will soon conjure up a plea for providence. The man who shot another in malice might say that providence led him to carry his gun that morning. The burglar providentially met with a companion who wished to relieve a householder of his spare plate. The petty pilferer saw goods lying unprotected near a tradesman’s door and they providentially happened to be exactly what he needed. It will not do! The pretence is too barefaced. Yet I fear that many who think themselves Christians are deluded by this wicked argument!

Such a method of reasoning would have led many into sin who are famous in history for their virtue. The three holy children would have escaped the fire and Daniel would never have been in the lion’s den if they had been guided by what men call providences. But note other plain instances—such as Joseph. Joseph’s mistress is so kind to him and he is in such a splendid position as head of the household—it is hard for him to deny her desire and lose his place. Had not providence put him into his fortunate position? Shall he throw it away? When his mistress tempts him, shall he risk all? Would it not be better to think that providence plainly hinted that he should comply? Joseph was not so base as to reason in that fashion! He knows that adultery cannot be tolerated and so he flees from his mistress and leaves his garment in her hands rather than remain near her seductions. Look at David, too. He is brought out by Abishai upon the field at night. There lies king Saul, sound asleep, and Abishai says to David, “God has delivered your enemy into your hands this day: now therefore let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear even to the earth at once, and I will not smite him the second time!” What a providence, was it not? The cruel foe was altogether in David’s hands and the executioner was eager to settle all further conflict by one fatal stroke! What could be clearer or simpler? Wonderful providence! Yet David never said a word as to providence, but replied, “Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless?” He therefore came away and left the king sleeping as he was. He would not follow opportunities, but would keep to the law of his God. I pray you, do the same and if ever everything seems to lead up to wrong-doing—and many circumstances unite to steer you in that direction—do not yield to them! Your guide in life is not a so-called providence, but an unquestionable precept of the Lord! Do as God bids you and do it at once. God help you to follow where He has laid down the lines! By His Spirit may He lead you in the way everlasting, for the path of obedience is the way of peace and righteousness.

A so-called providence *has often been a pretext for wrong-doing.* I dare say that many have erred through looking at circumstances rather than at commands. Look at Lot. Lot went and dwelt in Sodom, among a godless, filthy set of Canaanites. He had been with Abraham in the separated life before, but now he quit tent life for a city dwelling with its foul surroundings. Why did Lot go to Sodom? He looked and saw its well-watered plains—and as he had flocks and herds, it seemed a providence that he was able to go there and that his uncle Abraham had left him free to choose. Did not providence say, “Go to the well-watered plain of Sodom”? What could be plainer? I have known a sort of providence speak in that fashion to certain Christian people who were growing rich and desired to get into what is called society—they jumped at the first chance and fell into bad company. They entered upon a trade which promised to pay them well. True, it was a bad trade, a perilous trade to him that carried it on and a ruinous trade to those drawn into it—but then it would pay well. It was the well-watered plain of Sodom and they pleaded that they could not wisely forego it. Others will go to live in a certain district where there is no gospel preaching. They leave all their friends, their Bible class and every opportunity of usefulness for the sake of the hedges and the birds. Providence has found them a spot where they can be as idle as they like. When men go into dangerous courses, they thus speak of providence. Fine providence, is it not? Alas for Lot! In the end he had to read over again those lessons of providence by the light of the blazing cities of the plain. Think, also, of Aaron. He, on one occasion, fell so low as to try to throw his sin upon providence. When he had been making the golden calf for the people to worship and his brother Moses sharply upbraided him for it, he declared that the people were ready to stone him and when they brought their gold, he said, “Then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this

calf.” It is true the image came out, but it had first been molded and put in! Aaron wanted to make Moses believe that a special providence made the metal form itself into the shape of the ox-god. A wretched falsehood! Alas, that the priest of the Most High should palter with truth in this manner! And so there are people who tell you wonderful stories about what has happened to them and what has led them into their way of evil. Blessed forever be the providence of God! Let the Lord be worshipped and adored, for He is good, and does good, and good only! His providence is always holy! Stay clear of every blasphemous charge against it! Never let us avail ourselves of opportunities to do evil—but if we dare to do so—let us not saddle the blame of it upon the thrice-holy God!

Would you excuse any other man who should do you wrong on the ground of providence? Suppose a thief broke into your house and said that it was a providence that you had not fastened the back window, or that the fastening was so easy to open? Suppose he said that providence spared him a good deal of trouble because your drawers were not locked, nor your money put into the iron safe? What would you say about such providences? A person deceives you in business and takes you in—but he says that it was a very remarkable providence that put you in his way! Do you endorse such talk? Why, you would not listen to the fellow for a moment—and will you listen to yourself, when your heart begins to make the holy Lord an accomplice in your transgressions? No, no, there are devil’s providences as well as divine providences! And there are mistaken notions of providence and wretched perversions whereby the Holy One of Israel is grossly insulted and provoked!

Thus have I briefly given you three words of caution and the fourth is like unto them.

IV. WE MAY NOT EXCUSE OURSELVES IN DOING WRONG BY THE LAWFULNESS OF AN ACT IN ITSELF. What is right in another may not be right in me. That which another might do without offense may be a grievous wrong in a child of God.

For the mariner to go to Tarshish was right enough. We do not say that in itself it was wrong to go by sea to Tarshish. There would be an end to trade if ships might not roam the watery plains. Yes, my dear friend, it may be quite right for certain persons to pursue a course which you must not even think of! For the Tyrian sailors to go to Tarshish was their business, their calling, their duty—but it was very different with the prophet. It was not Jonah’s business, calling, or duty—why should he go to Tarshish? There is a solemn difference between being at sea in the path of duty and going there to escape service. He did exactly as the sailors did. I mean that, as a matter of form, it was the same—but they were right and he was wrong. They did not go on board to escape from the service of God—but he was doing so and that made all the difference. Two men may do the same thing and the one may be improving his grace by doing it—and the other may be increasing his *damnation* by doing it. After all, it is the *motive* that must rule our judgment of the action. Beware of defending your transgression from the fact that others may do it without being censured!

But might not Jonah be allowed to go to Tarshish if he wished? *Yes, it might, under certain circumstances, have been right for Jonah.* When he was off duty, it might have been good for his health for him to go to Tarshish—but it must not be so when God says to him, “Go to Nineveh.” You may not do that which is contrary to the Lord’s will, even though, in itself, the action may be innocent. We may not say, “I have a right to do it.” We have no right to do otherwise than as the Lord commands. We have no right to do wrong—and the more God loves us and the surer we are that we are His children—the more are we bound to follow closely in the way of truth and holiness. We are not saved by works, but because we are even now saved, we desire, in all our ways, to glorify Him who has saved us by His most precious blood. O dear heart, if you are, indeed, a servant of God, you will know that *obedience* is liberty, *holiness* is freedom! To the pure in heart sin would be bondage, while to do what God commands would be liberty. By divine grace we will to do the will of the Lord.

It was no excuse for Jonah’s sin that he acted in an honorable manner in the doing of it. It is true that Jonah paid his fare and that this was right, if he meant to take his passage. “He found a ship going to Tarshish, and he paid the fare thereof.” He did not steal on board and try to get a free passage as a stowaway. But someone asks, “When he had paid his fare, had he not a right to go?” Yes, he had, as far as the captain of the vessel was concerned. But he had no right before God! After paying his fare, how could he decline to go? He would lose his money, and that would be foolish. Yes, it is very easy to construct excuses for wrong courses, but they will hold no water. Apologies for disobedience are mere refuges of *lies*. If you do a wrong thing in the most right way in which it can be done, it does not make it right. If you go contrary to the Lord’s will, even though you do it in the most decent and, perhaps, in the most devout manner, it is, nevertheless sinful and it will bring you under condemnation.

Servants of God, you are under a higher law than anybody else. Redeemed with precious blood, chosen of God by His Sovereign grace, made heirs of eternal glory, it is yours to “perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord” by His good Spirit and so to do whatever He says to you, neither turning aside to the right hand nor to the left. Thus have I shown you that there is teaching in the incident at Joppa. I think it is legitimate teaching, from the fact that when Jonah wanted to do evil, everything seemed ready to his

hand—and yet he was doing grievously wrong. May this warning be useful to some of you, by God's grace! I do not know for whom this sermon is meant, but I have felt bound in spirit to deliver it. It is intended as a warning for somebody who is hearing it, or shall hereafter read it. Perhaps some dozen or two may find it applicable to their cases and, if it comes home to your consciences, I charge you, by the living God, do not turn a deaf ear to it! Let it search you through and through. Let it not only plow you, but scar you and cross-plow you and have its full effect upon your heart—and then, feeling that you have sinned, cast all your idle excuses to the wind and come to Jesus just as you are. Come to Jesus and find pardon for all your inexcusable sins! As long as you are sewing together the fig leaves of excuse, you will never come to Jesus for true covering. But when you have done with the spider's webs of foolish argument, the Holy Spirit will bring you to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, if you wished to go to Tarshish, it would be a great providence if you found a vessel bound for that port. But if you want to go to Jesus you may *always* go to Him. You may go to Him now! Sitting in that pew you may come to Jesus. If you go to Tarshish, you will have to pay the fare. There is no fare to pay in coming to Jesus. To Him it is, "Come and welcome." His salvation is free, gratis—given to all who are willing to receive. It is not to be bought by way of merit or of money—it is to be had freely by the way of Sovereign grace. I know that the impulse of yonder young man is to fly away from Christ and hope, and heaven—the Lord help him to resist the impulse! Your mother begged you to attend the house of God—the inclination is to go out for country strolls. Resist the wish and hear the gospel! Many go to Tarshish and are lost. I know that the temptation to yonder young woman is to forsake the way of righteousness, to follow after gaiety and so to go to Tarshish. Shut your ears to every whisper of the deluding foe and, however easy it may be for you to obey his suggestion—however even providence may seem to make a way for you—regard not the voice of the tempter and do not dishonor the Lord your God by supposing that He can really invite you by His providence to do that which He forbids you by His Word.

Listen to me and *come to Jesus! Come to Jesus now!* Perhaps tonight, if that young man does not come to Jesus, he will be lured into a den of vice and led into desperate sin; and for many a year he will not again feel that tenderness which is stealing over him just now. Trifle not with the wooing of divine grace lest you be ensnared by the lies of Satan! The man is strongly tempted now—a voice incessantly cries in his ears, "Go to Tarshish." I implore you, O my tempted brothers and sisters, nerve yourself to fight with this demon! Instead of hearkening to his alluring note, let the voice of Mercy have power with you. God the Holy Spirit grant that it may be so! "Come unto Me," says Jesus, "all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls." Seek not Tarshish, but Calvary! If you run from the presence of the Lord, a storm will pursue you! An angry sea will open its abysses for you! There may be no fish for you, no friendly whale to carry you to shore—and you may be lost forever! O man of God, run not away from your work! O sinner, lust not after vain and empty pleasure! Child of God, come back to Him from whom your heart has wandered and, from now on, by His grace, be diligently His servant to the end! Sinner, you that have gone far away from peace and hope, hear the heavenly voice tonight which warns you of your danger! Cry, "I will arise, and go to my Father." He will come to meet you! On your neck He will fall. He will kiss you, wash you, clothe you, save you and you shall praise Him world without end! Happy, indeed, shall I be if I have, by the grace of God, taught some souls to give up their dissembling and excuse-making! And if I have persuaded them to make full confession of sin before the Lord Jesus who will wash them till they are without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing!

PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Jonah 1, 2.

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—645, 185, 381.

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